

Rock 'N Roll and the Fall of the Soviet Empire

Cabot W. Peterson
November 30, 2016



1992 UTS graduates in Russia (from left) Chris Le Bas, Gregg Jones, Enrique Ledesma, Cabot Peterson, Marco Wagner

BARRYTOWN - As we approached our graduation from the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) in the spring of 1992 most of us already had a strong suspicion we would be sent to Russia. The Berlin Wall had been shattered in 1989 and the communist world, tilting on the edge of an abyss, had split open like an overripe piece of fruit, just as the UTS, Founder, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, [had predicted many years before](#).

Since seminarians had already been in Russia for some time - and stood hand-in-hand with our new brothers and sisters when the military tried, and failed, to depose Boris Yeltsin - we would not be the first to enter the newly liberated country. The Russian people were in a state of understandable confusion and uncertainty. On the one hand they were euphoric with their new-found sense of freedom; on the other, they had no idea where their country was going or who would be leading it there.

The one thing, however, we recent graduates quickly discovered was that almost all of the people we met, whether on the streets of Moscow or in our workshop site on the shores of the Black Sea, had a great love for America and, by association, the West as a whole.

A short time after we finished our week-long workshop and returned with our students to the city assigned to us, I discovered why their hearts were so filled with a love and admiration for the West that had nothing to do with who we were as individuals, or missionaries, or teachers, or whatever we thought ourselves to be.

We were simply the physical embodiment of a liberation that they knew in their hearts would come, they just didn't know when. In reality, unbeknownst to them and the rest of the world, the seed of their liberation may very well have been planted on January 8, 1935, the day Elvis Aaron Presley (and the heart and soul of rock 'n roll) was born, and continued with Bill Haley and the Comets, the Drifters, the Platters, the Everly Brothers, Bob Dylan, the Supremes and Motown, then back across the Atlantic to the Beatles and British Invasion of the 1960's, through the Rolling Stones, The Who, Cream, the Moody Blues, John Mayall's Blues Breakers, and back to America and Woodstock - Jimi Hendrix, Crosby, Stills & Nash, Santana, Sly and the Family Stone - and finally on to Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, the Eagles... and beyond.

This I learned from one of the Russian teachers I was assigned to work with at the workshop. One evening after we had arrived in the city of [Ekaterinburg](#), located at the foot of the Ural Mountains on the border with Asia and a mere 24-hour train ride from Moscow, I was invited to visit a friend's apartment with her and her husband.

The moment I walked through the door I was overwhelmed by what I saw. The living room of this tiny apartment - about the size of an average American bedroom - was lined with bookshelves on all three sides from floor to ceiling, and each “bookshelf” was filled with records, or, more precisely, rock ‘n roll records, from top to bottom. Except for a couch, a chair, a small coffee table and a few lamps, each “bookshelf” was filled with literally hundreds of records, and, certainly, all of them purchased on the black market.

In none of these “bookshelves” sat an actual book; there wasn’t room for any.

In America, as teenagers we rebelled against our parents, and “[The Establishment](#),” and authority in general as a rite of passage. In Russia they rebelled against the Soviet Empire and kept alive their dreams of freedom by listening to the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and anybody and everybody else they could get their hands on.

In America, our protests helped bring an end to the war in Vietnam. In the USSR, their quiet and clandestine protests helped bring down an empire that, at its height, had either control of or influence over nearly half the globe.



Members of the UTS Class of 1992 (from left) Enrique Ledesma, Gregg Jones, Paul Saver, William Haines, and William Swinnerton Stoertz on a post-graduation hike.

Testimonials from the former Soviet Union

Dear UTS alumni/ae,

As we approach the end of another year we in Unification Theological Seminary Alumni Relations send our best wishes to you and your family for a happy and healthy holiday season. We would also like to send our appreciation to all of you who have taken the time to read UTS News, the Applied Unificationism blog, the Journal of Unification Studies, or the Cornerstone, or have visited our website at www.uts.edu. We also thank you for having contributed articles and photographs.

A special thanks, also, to all who have supported our fundraising efforts by joining the 40/40 Campaign which honors the first 40 years of UTS’s existence, by starting a scholarship fund, or by sending a donation “out of the blue” just because of your love for UTS.

Historic dates at UTS are not rare, but we would be amiss if we did not acknowledge those who went to the former Soviet Union 25 years ago after its collapse on December 26, 1991, to participate in the first workshops set up and run by seminarians.

For those of us fortunate enough to have been chosen for this mission, the memories will always remain with us. It is with this thought that we would like to solicit stories and photos from those seminarians who participated in those historic events.

Whether you stayed for only a few weeks or for 10 years or more, we would very much like to publish your stories and print your photographs.

Please contact me, Cabot Peterson, by email at c.peterson@uts.edu or cabotpeterson@gmail.com or by telephone at (845) 752-3000 ext. 220.

Sincerely,

Cabot W. Peterson
Assistant Director of Alumni Relations

The Soviet Empire, as is so often the case, crumbled from within by a system it could no longer support economically, and by a people who had long ago stopped believing in its precepts.

“We’ve known for a long time that communism was wrong and that it didn’t work,” said my teacher friend, “but we couldn’t do anything about it. We never really believed that stuff they told us about America. I honestly don’t know if we really believed this day would ever come, but we never gave up hope.”

Her students wouldn’t let her give up either. Through her 25 years of teaching English I was the first American - and first native English speaker - she had ever met. One day she brought me a thick stack of papers for me to look at. She told me it had been a gift from one of her eighth grade classes.

In perfect, hand-written English the lyrics of the entire Pink Floyd double album, “The Wall,” had been printed out for her.

“They did it on their own and when they were finished they gave it to me,” she said. “I’d like to think they did it as an English lesson, but I know that’s not the reason. Just like their older brothers and sisters they did it as a protest against the government.”

It might seem far-fetched to believe that merely playing rock ‘n roll records could help facilitate the end of the Soviet Empire. There’s no denying, however, that the young people who grew up in the rock ‘n roll era from the mid-1950’s on were of a different mindset than their parents, much like here in America.

Each group had survived a devastating war and a long period of suffering through a worldwide Depression, and had entered the Atomic Age and the Cold War at virtually the same time. Though on different sides of the world and on opposite sides of the conflict, both battled “the system” in their own way.

The Americans foray into Vietnam turned out to be both a military and political disaster, causing average citizens to protest in the streets, demanding to bring the troops home. The Soviet Union followed suit shortly thereafter with an ill-advised invasion of Afghanistan that became so unpopular mothers of soldiers protested in front of the Kremlin demanding their soldier sons be brought home. Recognizing their failure to conquer the country and make it a Soviet puppet state after a nearly 10-year struggle, the Soviet army pulled its forces out and returned home. Just two years later the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed into history.

Historians and politicians will no doubt point to this event as the straw that finally broke the back of the Soviet Empire, sending it into an economic death spiral it was unable to counteract. To blindly accept this as historical fact, however, diminishes the clandestine forces at work inside the Soviet Union that helped to bring about its ultimate destruction.

Or, as Chuck Berry put it, “Hail, hail, rock ‘n roll.”